



Mc Dougall's Good Stories for Children



Remarkable Experiences of a Small Boy Who Was Really Very Bright, and Thought He Knew Everything

OSCAR COOPER was the smartest boy in the village of Sprows. He was the best speller and pronouncer, and stood at the head of all the others in classes at school. He was never known to make an error, and even the teachers sometimes gazed at him with a sort of awe, as if they suspected that he was more than human, for teachers can make mistakes as well as other people. But they never caught Oscar making one.

Well, when he at last won the great prize for spelling and pronouncing, which was given by the Honorable Charley Fortner, the richest man in Sprows, he was so elated that he walked home with the prize as if on air. The prize was a grand one; nothing less than a gigantic dictionary a foot thick, containing about a million words and a half million pictures, and it was all the boy could carry, too.

He was so proud of his triumph that he secretly showed the other boys, who, of course, loved him dearly, because he was so clever. He had "spelled down" the whole school, and it swelled his little head until he thought he was a wonder. When he reached home and displayed the prize to his parents they simply held their breath as they looked at him and he said:

"I wish they had given me a telescope or an electric battery, for I hardly think this prize is exactly suited to me. Some other boy may need it far more than I, for really I think a dictionary is not a necessity to a boy that knows as much as I. I guess I already know every word in the book, although it is so ponderous. I apprehend that I'll have but scant use for it."

"Oh, there may be a few old-fashioned words in it that you don't know," said his proud father, "but not many."

"I hardly presume so," replied Oscar, conceitedly. "I guess I've got them all in my cranium. My vocabulary is truly Cyclopean."

"It certainly is," exclaimed Mamma Cooper. "I never saw anything like it in my life."

Oscar ate his dinner with the air of a college professor at Commencement time, and afterward he remained at home to show all comers the great prize, at which all gazed with awe and astonishment, for it certainly was an immense dictionary and cost all of fifteen dollars.

Then, when he went to bed he carried his treasure upstairs and laid it on a table in his bedroom. One would suppose that during all this time he would have opened and examined the great book, but he was too busy telling everybody how he had spelled down all competitors at school to even peep within its covers, and he got into bed with his head still inflated with his own marvelous cleverness and soon went to sleep.

After a time a slight noise in the room awoke him with a start. The moon was pouring into the room a blaze of bright winter light that showed plainly every object about him, and as he looked around to see what had awakened him he saw that the dictionary was partly open and something was emerging from between the thick leather covers. What it was he could not see.

Then his astonished eye caught sight of many tiny figures moving briskly about on the floor, and in another instant he recognized them as letters.

The whole alphabet was scurrying about on the carpet like ants. The letters were about as tall as one of his fingers, and he saw them plainly. They seemed to be playing some sort of game, but he soon saw that they were rapidly forming words, some short, some of immense length, like boys playing "snap the whip" words that stretched across the rug beside his bed, and were partly lost in the shadows. He spelled "parallelipipedon," "telemeasynary," and "encycliridon" quite easily, as they formed before him like a regiment of soldiers.

He forgot about the shapeless thing between the dictionary covers until he raised his eyes and saw a number of shadowy forms standing about his bedside.

These were most astonishing; there were some who seemed to be men, but their noses, arteries and other organs were quite visible, and, besides that, they were covered from head to foot with tiny numbers. One man's head was marked off like a map in colors, with a name in each space. One was all veins and nothing else, and suddenly he saw a skeleton with every bone numbered, but in the air about it were the names of all the bones corresponding to these numbers.

Another skeleton appeared beside him, but this one showed a rear view. Then Oscar saw a great ox with all the parts, as butchers cut up their meat, marked off on his hide and labeled, after which a bird appeared similarly inscribed, and then a horse decorated in the same manner.

But all these people and animals seemed like mere phantoms, as unreal as shadows themselves, which was but natural, of course, as, in fact, they do not exist, but are merely pictures in the dictionary made to instruct us in the different parts of animals, men and birds. But this Oscar did not know then, and as they gathered about him he began to tremble. He was about to cover his head with the bedclothes when he saw another figure. This one was real and actual, standing out against the background of shadowy forms like a living man.

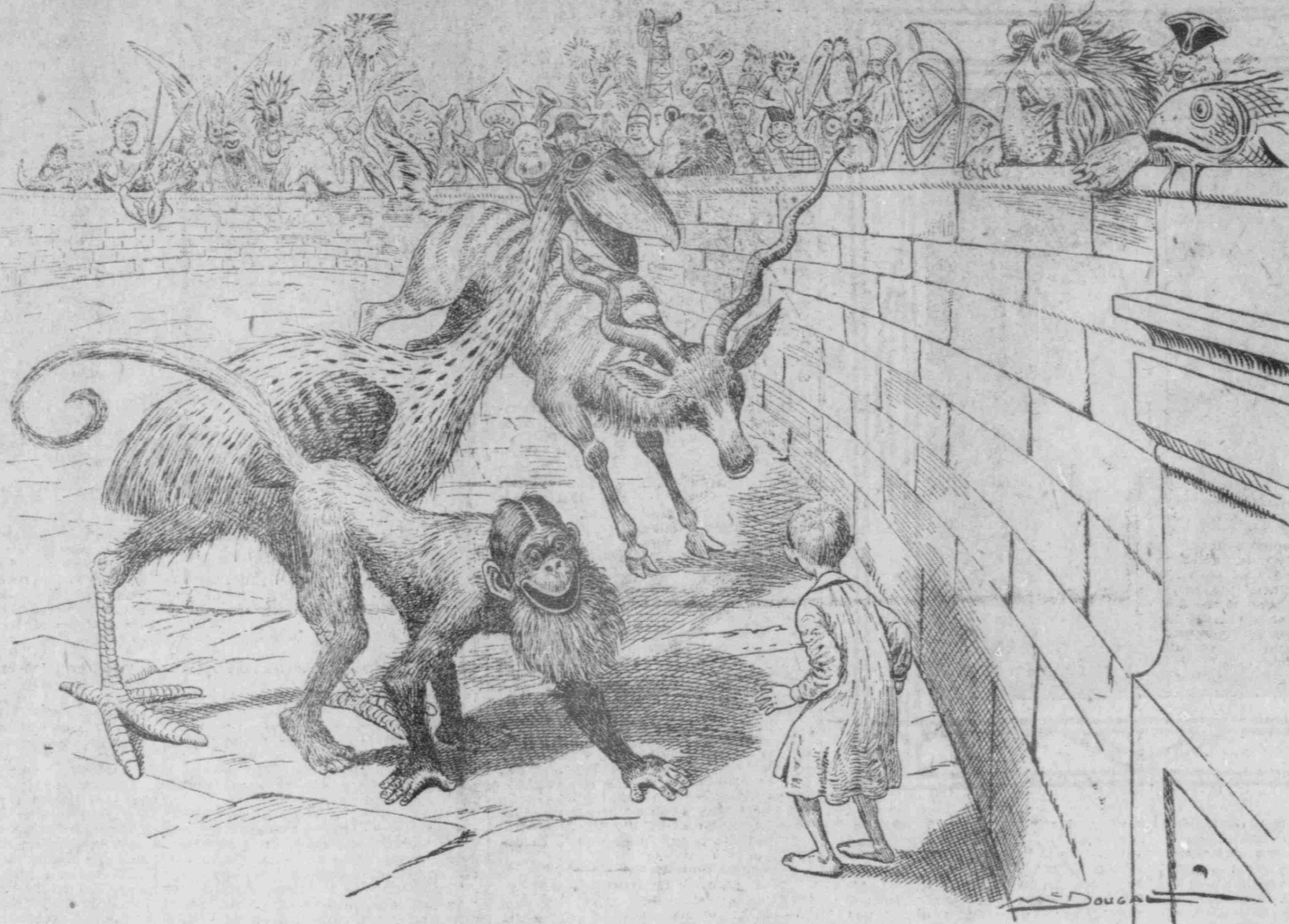
Oscar felt a sort of relief when he saw him. He was tall and bearded, his black eyes flashed under heavy brows, and he wore a long silver beard beneath which Oscar detected an occasional gleam of a suit or shining, golden-hued armor. He strode to the bedside, brushing aside the letters and disturbing their manoeuvres very much, and after looking at Oscar very fiercely for a space, he said in a deep, hoarse voice:

"You are the smartest and most accomplished boy, I understand, in all Sprows. Do you recognize me?"

Now, as this was certainly the very first time Oscar had ever seen a man who wore armor it is not surprising that he should reply at once:

"Yes, sir, I have never had the pleasure of seeing you before."

"Ah, perhaps not. On reflection, I should not expect you to know me at sight, but I will help you out. I am a Tetrarch. Now, of course, you know all about me!"



OSCAR FACES THE THREE STRANGE THINGS

"I am sorry," replied Oscar, "but I am as much in the dark as ever."

"Certainly you're in the dark; I didn't bring a torch, but I am in the light of the moon and perfectly easy to see. Do you mean to say that you do not even know what a Tetrarch is?"

"I never heard of one before," said Oscar, sharply. "Is that a foreign word?"

"Certainly not. If you are so smart you should know that," said the Tetrarch testily. "I am afraid you are really an ignoramus."

"You are the first that ever said that," answered Oscar. "Go and ask my teacher! Huh!"

"I will test you," said the tall man, gravely, "before I decide." He then held out a small circular piece of shining shell that was suspended from his neck by a leathern band, and asked:

"What is it? Tell me its name."

Oscar looked blankly at the shell ornament, and then looked again. To save his life he couldn't tell what it was. It was not a locket nor a medal, and finally he stammered: "I—I think—perhaps it's a sort of charm or talisman."

"Perhaps it's a fiddlestick," shouted the Tetrarch. "Perhaps it's a tiddledewink. Tell me its name, oh boy that doesn't need a dictionary. That's all I require of you."

Oscar was obliged to confess that he had never seen such an object, and could not give its name. The Tetrarch snorted:

"Bah! Just as I expected! And you call yourself bright and clever! I'll tell you its name! It's a Runtie, that's what it is, and I got it from an Indian chief. Bah!"

"How should I know that?" grumbled Oscar. "It's in the dictionary!" shouted Tetrarch, angrily. "That's why!"

All the shadowy forms in the room seemed to grin and poke each other in the place where their ribs would have been had they been illustrated completely, and the animals hopped around in glee at Oscar's discomfiture.

"Have you ever seen a 'seismograph' or a 'tremik' or a 'matatorium' or a 'jong' or a 'chrysoprase'?" added the Tetrarch, frowning terribly.

"Of course not," replied Oscar, after a long pause.

"AND THEY, TOO, ARE IN THE DICTIONARY!" roared the angry old man, standing over the bed in a most threatening manner. "Why don't you know them?"

"Go!" exclaimed Oscar, falling into the school-boy's slang without thinking, "I haven't looked into it yet!"

"Ha! And yet you presumed that you would have but scant use for it! But I am not yet through with you. If you, with all the learning of which you have boasted, can answer a few questions, just a few fairly easy ones that I will propound, I will let you go; but fail, and you are doomed!"

"What business have you to ask me any questions?" cried Oscar, trying to brave it out. "You ain't my teacher!"

"I am a Tetrarch, the mighty ruler of millions, and who dares dispute my right to ask anything, even riddles and conundrums, if I wish! Not you, I am sure, for I am here to punish and not take impudence from you!"

Oscar trembled, for the Tetrarch's eyes were terrible to see as he glared down at the frightened lad. Then he added, slowly:

"Now, I will give you a chance to redeem yourself. Tell me, and tell me in plain, simple words, how to use the catclrops."

Oscar looked at him blankly.

"Catclrops? I—I don't think I ever heard of it. What is it?"

The Tetrarch frowned. Then he said:

"Never mind, I see that you are utterly ignorant regarding catclrops."

"Oh, I suppose it's some kind of drug. Of course, as I am no druggist, I don't know it," replied Oscar, pertly.

"Catclrops are instruments of war, ignoramus!" shouted the Tetrarch. "Now tell me how to catch a mantis!"

Oscar had no answer ready.

"Can you do it with a calash or with an 'ancurism'?" demanded the angry man.

"I suppose so," replied the boy in a low tone. "I don't know."

"A calash, idiot, is a sort of carriage and a mantis is a bug," retorted the Tetrarch, sneering. "Oh, my! but you are a scholar! Here's another for you."

an easy one, too! What is a Saint Rupert's Drop?"

Oscar shook his head in silence. He did not know. He was beginning to perceive what a fool he had been, but he was not quite ready to admit it. The Tetrarch asked:

"Is it possible that they have never shown you those little glass drops that turn into dust at a touch? How odd!"

"That's in the upper classes, I guess," mumbled Oscar. "Or maybe in college."

"Pooh! Every boy should know about Saint Rupert's Drops! But tell me this: What's a Bunder?"

"A blunder! That's what I made, I suppose," began Oscar.

"A BUNDER!" roared the Tetrarch. "B-U-N-D-E-R-BUNDER!"

Oscar shook with fear.

"What's a caïque, then?" asked his tormentor. Oscar was speechless as he tried to think whether he had ever heard either of these words, and the Tetrarch, turning toward the dictionary, shouted:

"Hi, there. Bring me the bunder directly. Yes, and also the caïque. I will give him his choice of either, and we will sail with him to the farthest Limbo. I don't suppose you even know what a Limbo is, eh?" he added, returning to the bedside.

Before Oscar could reply, but two boats, both of strange and outlandish shapes, sailed up to the bed. One was long, narrow, pointed, with ten oars; the other shorter, with a house or cabin and a great triangular sail.

"This," said the Tetrarch, pointing to the sailing-craft, "is a Bunder, a Bombay Bunder, and this is a Caïque from the Bosphorus, and both, as you no doubt perceive, from out of the dictionary. Now we will prove to you that you have use for it, as we will take a sail in one of these boats. You can take your choice!"

Oscar cried: "I won't go with you! Mamma! Papa! Help! Help!"

The Tetrarch smiled calmly. Then he said:

"Come, I am waiting. Choose!"

Neither of his parents answering to his call for help, Oscar's heart sank, but he tried to gain time by pretending to examine both boats carefully. After a few moments the Tetrarch said:

"I will wait no longer! In with you!"

He seized the boy and dragged him out of bed. Oscar tried to struggle, but the mail-clad warrior, of course, was far too strong for him, and he was deposited in the boat with a bump. The Bunder was the craft selected by the Tetrarch, and as soon as the ancient ruler took his seat a gentle wind sprang up from the direction of the washstand and the vessel moved slowly across the carpet. All the figures in the room ranged themselves in line and stood gazing at them as the boat moved away, leaving them behind as if on a shore, and finally, as the Bunder seemed to penetrate the wall of the bedroom, they all faded away and vanished in the distance.

The Tetrarch seized the long tiller and steered forth into the night calmly, but poor Oscar's heart beat like a trip hammer as he looked out of the side of the cabin over the moonlit water, the waves of which already reeked the craft, and saw his home fade away. Then came a cloud over the moon, and all was completely dark; nothing was seen nor heard but the constant lap, lap, lap of the waves against the bow of the Bunder, but the sail was belled out by a strong breeze and she rushed along rapidly, bearing Oscar—where?

Out came the moon again, and he felt a little easier. Once in a while some great fish would rise to the surface and peer up at them with eyes like zig-lamps, and the Tetrarch would make a remark like this:

"Ah, there's an Arapaima! Never saw such a large one!" or "Hello! Look at the Blanquillo! Isn't he a beauty?" And there's a Gizzard-shad! Strange to see them here! I see, too, a hippocampus floating along, and just beneath him a John-dory! See them!"

"You know all these fish, do you not?" he asked, turning to Oscar, who was staring hard at the queer fish. The boy made no reply, for he had no time, as the Tetrarch talked along just as if he were alone. As some birds appeared flying by he exclaimed:

"See! Yonder comes a quetzal! My! my! and there's a roller, also! And bless my soul, I see a pair of hoopoes and drongos! This is wonderful! Did you ever see a drumbling? There's one overhead. Also a Chacalead! And upon my word there is a

Lory, otherwise called a Tursoon! What a splendid exhibition of birds, and probably all for your benefit, because you must know them all so well! Perhaps you can tell me the name of this brilliant one that's approaching us so fast? Ah, still obstinately silent! Well, that's an Orlolan, and a fine one, too!"

Thus he went on, and it seemed to Oscar that every bird that he had never heard of was coming along to torture and shame him.

He wondered now how he could have imagined that he knew anything, as he began to discover so many things of which he was totally ignorant.

The Tetrarch asked him to state the difference between cirrus clouds and cumulus ones; he required him to tell whether he noticed the phosphorescence of the water, and demanded him to say why salt water was heavier than fresh. Poor Oscar's head was swimming, when suddenly his tormentor shouted:

"Land ahead, and it surely is the coast of Coromandel! You know that coast well, I suppose, my learned geographer, the cleverest boy in Sprows?"

Oscar had heard of it, but I do not blame him for forgetting it under such trying circumstances. He wondered how the Tetrarch always managed to light on names and places with which he was unfamiliar; light on them unfailingly, and never by any chance give him an opportunity of showing that he knew something, at least. This was the most uncanny thing of all the annoying circumstances, and he gazed at the coast with a frown, although he would otherwise have been glad to see any foreign land.

"Where is the Coromandel Coast?" asked the Tetrarch, with the air of a school teacher.

"Don't know!" snapped Oscar.

"Hoighly toighly! Dear Dear! How perplexing! I did hope you knew that much. You are truly the most densely ignorant lad I have ever met. Here are other interesting places. Observe them."

The Bunder shot along so fast that the shores rushed past like a fast moving panorama. Strange trees, tall pagodas and obelisks were silhouetted against the dark blue sky, their edges shining in the moonlight as if they had been cut out of paper cardboard and stood up there to confuse him, and he could not tell the name of a single thing he saw.

Here was a mosque at the water's edge, its gilded dome rising like a huge orange above the dark green palms, but he could not tell it from an ice-house. Yonder a slender minaret, reared its straight shaft upward above rounded housetops, but he did not recall its name. Suddenly the Tetrarch said:

"Hello! We are already in the Caramanassa, and I never noticed that we had even got into the Ganges. Know anything about this river?"

Of course, Oscar didn't; who on earth would remember that name except a school teacher, who has to know everything? The boat sped on.

"We are in Kalahandi now," said the steersman. "Here's where the deadly hamadryad rears its awful head to strike some unwary traveler through the jungle."

"I suppose that's a snake," guessed Oscar, doubtfully.

"Right for once; but can you spell it?"

Oscar couldn't, and didn't even try. The Tetrarch sniffed disdainfully. Then he continued:

"Now we are in Bah-dur-garh. Where are we?"

"Oh, what's the use!" moaned Oscar, dejectedly.

"Don't you know we've been in India all this time? Well, as I see you know little about the Orient we will go elsewhere."

The Bunder kept right along, shooting through the water like an arrow, and in a few minutes Oscar saw tall marble columns and great buildings rearing up above solemn, waving cypress trees, and the shore all covered with myrtle. High mountains, snow-topped, showed in the background, and all these, too, looked like things cut from paper. Men in white garments, such as he had seen in pictures, were roaming about beneath the trees and reciting poems to one another, men crowned with ivy and violets and bearded strangely.

"Ah, dear old Hellas!" cried the Tetrarch. "I have not seen it in a thousand years. You know this land?"

Now, if he had said "dear old Greece," Oscar would have recognized it at once, but "Hellas" was a new one to him. He made no reply, and the Tetrarch added:

"There's a fine statue of Herakles, isn't it?"

"Looks like Herakles," said Oscar, examining it.

Queer Beings Surrounded Him, Took Him to Unheard-of Lands, and Talked About Unknown Things

"I have seen a picture like that."

"It's all the same. Herakles is Greek."

"Everything you say is Greek to me!" sighed the boy.

"Yonder walks old Aesculapius, and behind him strides the great Milo, who carried an ox on his shoulders. Fine gentleman is Milo. Of course you are familiar with the tale?"

Oscar was getting so mad that he was quite ready to jump overboard, when the boat's prow touched the shore and the Tetrarch sprang out.

"Come," said he, "and we will soon settle your fate."

He led Oscar toward a group of men under a tree, and when he reached them he said:

"Oh, philosophers and seers of mighty Greece, I bring to you a strange and wonderful being, a boy who boasts that he knows it all and yet has never looked into the dictionary."

They glared at him in silence.

"What think you, great Pericles, and you, oh, Socrates, of such a wonder?"

"I do not understand you," replied Socrates, while Pericles stared in proud amazement. "If you will kindly explain what you are talking about I will answer you, although I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"Why, just as I say. This boy never saw the inside of a dictionary!"

"Well, neither have I," answered Socrates. "What on earth is a dictionary?"

"Great Eblis!" exclaimed the Tetrarch. "I forgot. They were not invented in your time. Excuse me." He hurried away with Oscar, who was delighted at his discomfiture, and who had a feeling of kindness for Socrates that he would have liked to express.

Up through the cypress groves they went until at last they came to an immense circular depression between the hills. Around its level bottom, where a few scraggly cedar trees were growing, were ranged row after row of stone benches, and its resemblance to a circus struck Oscar instantly. It was very old, as he saw at once, for many ancient trees grew between the stone seats, which were crumbled and shattered in many places. The Tetrarch stopped and said:

"This is the stadium. What is a stadium?"

"A circus," replied Oscar, at a guess.

"Right, and now you will see a circus that will surprise you! In yonder amphitheatre you will face three animals from the dictionary you despise, three noble beasts, who, if you do not at once recognize them and name them properly, will tear you limb from limb!"

Oscar shuddered and began to cry. The Tetrarch added:

"I will help you out just a little bit. I will tell you the names of the three, but will not reveal which is which. That you must discover for yourself, if you do not know them. They are the Zpyornis, the Hanuman and the Koodoo."

He conducted the boy into the centre of the amphitheatre and said: "Here I leave you to your own resources. If you can't name the three animals you are a goner, sure. Be careful, and look sharp! Also, farewell!"

"But who are all these?" cried Oscar, seeing for the first time that suddenly all the seats were filled with every sort of creature. Not only were all manner of men in every sort of costume sitting there, as well as an immense number of unknown animals, but queer instruments, machines, vehicles, boats and plants were there, thousands of them!

"These are the things in the dictionary that you do not know!" replied the Tetrarch, grinning maliciously. "They are here to see your finish! Here come the awful three, and I must leave."

He skipped nimbly away, but when Oscar tried to follow he found a stone wall several feet high before him, and it went all around the circus, too. He saw that there was no exit, and as he looked there sprang into the arena three monstrous forms, one that of an immense bird, the Zpyornis, the next that of a bearded monkey, the Hanuman, and the third the horned Koodoo, a great, deer-like creature with glittering eyes. They all advanced slowly toward him, while the spectators leaned forward eagerly. Then the Hanuman shouted:

"Who are we? Who are we?
We are the 'dreadful unknown Three!
Whee! Whee! Whoop! Whoop!"

Oscar knew them not; he had never even heard of one of them, and they saw it at once. All three crouched for a spring, each eye gleaming with hungry malice. Oscar shrank back against the stone wall and shivered in dread, while an icy perspiration broke out upon his white forehead.

Then, as the giant bird's long neck and head were raised, and the great monkey dashed forward, he leaped aside to avoid their rush. A mighty leap it was, and when he struck the hard stone of the arena the shock seemed to shatter every bone in his body, but instantly the fearful assailants vanished like so much smoke.

He rubbed his eyes. All the vast audience had also vanished and the sun was shining. Then he saw that he was lying on the floor of his bedroom, and there stood his father at the open dictionary with a most astonished look on his face.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Is that the way you get out of bed every morning, like a bird falling out of a nest?"

Oscar looked around confused, and then he realized that it had been a dream. He stood up and his father said:

"I've been looking in the dictionary to find out how to spell 'separate.' Can't remember whether it's an 'a' or an 'e' in the middle. Which is it?"

To this day Mr. Cooper will never get over the amazement which overcame him when Oscar replied:

"I can't remember. Let's both look for it!"

After that he was the humblest boy in the school, and, strange to say, that day he really began to learn things and to know what studying really means, and when he told me the story he said he was awfully glad that the Tetrarch had captured him, for, after all, he half believes it really happened.

WALT McDUGALL.